

AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE: TRAINING AND POWER IN AN INDUSTRIAL SETTING

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Abstract

This paper discusses the perspectives of one training professional in a corporate industrial setting employing union workers. The struggle for power is the hidden agenda (Cunningham, 1998; Garrick & Rhodes, 2000; Newman, 1990) as management uses seemingly innocuous training programs for control. Examples are discussed and analyzed.

Introduction

A popular belief is that no training is neutral and that HRD is a system that was developed to neutralize the power of the unions (Cunningham, 1998; Newman, 1990). Since the post-World War II, unions and their members have experienced a time of unparalleled prosperity followed by a catastrophic decline. Unions experienced a power shift from a counterbalance to corporate power down to a lonely entity devoid of voice and direction. During this time of gloom, unions have been searching for their voice as well as their role in the high tech, globalized world. Through carefully orchestrated business tactics and procedures, corporations have all but diminished the power and capacity of unions and their ability to provide the oppositional ability for a balanced society (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Newman, 1990, 1994).

Training programs for union workers are not quarantined events specific unto the corporation. They are a fluid and dynamic magnification of the power structures and imbalances existing in society (Garrick & Rhodes, 2000). This paper explores and discusses the experiences of one HRD professional caught in the middle of the storm that is union training, caught between management and worker interests. As this paper illustrates, seemingly innocuous training programs, such as OSHA safety training programs, evolve into a bitter power struggle and explosive situations. This paper discusses in detail the "hidden agenda" of a training program provided for unionized workers.

The training was for union workers in a fully integrated, American steel production plant from 1994 through 2000. At the time of these activities, the location employed upwards of 2000 union and management workers. The operation consisted of two plants. One was the initial process housing the blast furnaces, a dual vessel Basic Oxygen Process (BOP) Shop, a Ladle Metallurgical Facility (LMF), and a Dual Strand Continuous Caster that produced the steel slabs that were shipped to a rolling and finishing plant. The second housed a Hot Mill that rolled the slabs into coils. The two Pickling Lines removed scale from the steel coils. Also housed were Annealing facilities, a Terne coating operation, and Galvanizing lines. These processes coated and finished the product per customer requests. My job was to analyze workplace hazards and skills/knowledge gaps and develop training programs to address them in addition to training that was given by management.

Of all the training I developed and delivered, it was always to address either an OSHA-related safety/hygiene situation or the company's gain through worker skill refinement. The agenda for the company was to always strive for efficiency and quality, which is important to stay competitive and in business. But, the company also espoused the theory that the workers were the single biggest assets they had and was definitely worth developing (Nora, 1990) The

espoused policy was that one time upgrades could be made to machinery but the workers were open to educate as thinking, autonomous, human beings on the shop floor.

Continuous Improvement/Worker Involvement

The training structure in the workplace began as sharing power with the union workers according to contract. The trainings related to developing the "Continuous Improvement" program all emphasized the work in teams to solve problems and help the organization to learn from its mistakes and become better. The basic and underlying premise of this program, according to management, was "the workers doing the job know the job the best." The company wanted a system that would allow comparison and documentation of workers that could easily be entered into a database and referenced. During the development of the Jobs Operations and Basic Skills procedures (J.O.B.S.), a manager and two to three union workers familiar with the specific position in which the task was a part wrote procedures for performing each task within the position and the associated skills and required equipment. Additionally, they would include the specific safety and hygiene guidelines, also numbered for reference purposes, that impacted the task. All the while the company maintained that this was not a program where workers would be removed from the job and lose pay. This was a procedure that allowed the union worker to get better thus helping the overall business plan of the crew, the department and the corporation. Each J.O.B.S. task was given a referent number - which could be entered into a database.

Once the procedures were written, they were to be reviewed and updated, if necessary, every one to two years by a manager and one or two union workers familiar with the task. The stated reason was to account for changes in procedure or equipment upgrades. However, in practical application, instead of providing the necessary and proper education for the union workers to successfully complete the task, time on the task and missed/repeated steps were observed and noted and a corrective training slip was issued to the worker. This was done to review a worker and remove them from a job since it was deemed theirs was not the best effort towards achieving the department's goals. By allowing union members, usually the most senior workers, to perform the actual write up, this served as a way the company gave some power to the workers as a type of ownership and to get their knowledge but would never permit full control over J.O.B.S. It was also a way in which the company could create a divisive atmosphere among workers, although this may have been secondary, since disagreements may, and did, occur over interpretations as to the best method in performing the different tasks required of the position.

Through the execution of the continuous improvement program, teams developed objectives that would contribute to the success of the department. Workers had the opportunity to identify areas for improvement in a team based approach and were given the power to develop their idea (now a project), assemble all relevant parties (maintenance shops, managers, and vendors), and, if given management approval, implement it. This did give the workers significant ownership of their department and its direction, at least initially and a sense of power and agenda seemed to permeate the team meetings. The project's implementation would be permanent and added to the procedure in the J.O.B.S. package. If it was a safety or other issue, it became part of the department's policy. The team would then be given some type of award when they met an objective. Awards were initially food brought into the meeting place or a celebration at a local establishment or restaurant. The awards were soon then limited to \$25 gift cards to Wal-Mart for each objective successfully met. Then, the celebrations began to be delayed, as a couple years passed, to where they were given a bag lunch from the manager's dining room, if anything at all.

In the managers-only meetings, we were often told that, since the workers have been "contacted" regarding a certain issue or safety/ISO/quality/ policy/procedure, we were to find and document those not in compliance. Mostly, however, the situation became one in which we were to have a minimum of ten "contacts" a week regarding general safety procedures and at least one "training contact" per worker per week. In addition to the personal observations, the workers were also issued a "training packet" which contained information regarding the following: a Safe Job Procedure; a safety contact; a quality contact; incident/accidents write up in the plant; steel mill fatality reports; a general contact; a procedure contact; an environmental contact; and a breakdown of departmental statistics including production, safety, quality, and incident write ups. The manager would hand this packet to the worker and the worker signed agreeing they received the packet. This signature paper was kept on file and all material issued in the packet was now a part of the worker's permanent training record and entered into the database through the computer for which each manager was responsible entering those workers they "contacted." All contact documentation was entered into the database thus keeping a record of all contacts for every worker. This sounds like a very good idea since the information in the "contact" could save their life on day. But, the packet meant that the worker was responsible for understanding the material within it. Also, the training and contact slips were also implications that the worker now knew the specific information given and a signature stated their agreement.

The underlying reasons for the training was twofold: 1) this was not to be a record for "training" purposes but a record of nonconformity and procedural errors that could be used if the company needed to fire an worker or downsize the workforce, and 2) documentation proving the company's compliance with ISO certification standards that mandated the company to keep a well documented training and safety policy.

Control Through Worker Involvement

I had the dilemma of telling workers who had been on the job and knew the limitations of the machinery what they should be doing differently as opposed as to getting their input and following through with it. Their knowledge of the machinery was something that was passed down from generation to generation (Garrick & Freeman, 2000; Newman, 1990; Schied, 1995). Continuous Improvement and the ultimate ISO -certification became the company's imperative and its mission. The introduction of ISO to the workforce was simple enough: 1) say what you do, 2) write it down, 3) do it, and 4) check it. This was very calming in its message and had the worker's thinking that they would have some collective input.

The company tried for worker buy in from the inception and approached it from the normal procedure used for buy in. Instead of involving the entire workforce for its input (serious input that would be implemented) in all phases of developing a continuous improvement program that would eventually lead to an ISO certification, only a few of the workers were chosen. The workers were not proposing a 2000+ worker get together, just to talk with each crew as to what they perceive as the issues existing and in what ways would/could a solution be implemented to remedy the problem. They mostly wanted to be recognized for having knowledge that would make the company successful and to be heard since this was their livelihood and their financial future for themselves and dependents. Being a steelworker was their defining trait and how they identified themselves and being systematically silenced seemed to them as a denial of who they were. The workers felt they had more of a stake in the success of the plant than did managers. They were steelworkers and took pride in that. The workers also understood that not every problem they suggested would get addressed but they would have appreciated the attempt. This was the problem with the company's usual route of trying to secure worker buy in.

The usual route consisted of choosing workers, sometimes with seniority and sometimes not, which led to disapproval and disdain since the feeling of another program was being shoved down the workers' throats. The problem was, no one took the role of the union CI or ISO Coordinator seriously. It was a daytime job filled by a union member and this member was cast as a company puppet and out of touch with reality that existed on the shop floor. If anything, it created divisiveness among the workers in a "divide-and-conquer" fashion. Some of the workers were willing to try the program since they had some say. But others remained vehemently opposed to any such programs due to the lies that were told in the past where money was given to an expert and the program was ultimately eliminated.

The union's perception was this was another in a long line of programs tried by the management and forced upon the union. The union perceived, with good reason, that a program would be introduced in which management would highlight how this program was in the workers' best interest. But after the program would be in place, it always eroded to some program that never delivered on its promise and was just another attempt to control workers.

One of the main contentions of the union was that how could management, especially upper management, develop and initiate programs since they are not on the shop floor often and they do not see the real problems. These programs only reflected the perceptions that the management had of what the problems were on the shop floor without doing any long term studies and/or significant surveys of those who were on the floor every day. The union was pretty much resigned to the fact that these programs were just another fad where some consultant would be paid an exorbitant fee. It was just another rehash of what outsiders thought the union workers and the work environment needed.

Control Through Safety

The company's concern regarding workers' safety and health sounds very altruistic and innocuous but there is something deeper here. As the trainer, a significant internal struggle for me was presenting safety and hygiene training to the workforce in response to uncovered airborne contaminant hazards while knowing that engineering and administrative was not even considered an option. In the management meetings, in which I was a participant, engineering and administrative controls were never discussed as an option. The discussion immediately turned to what specific personal protective equipment would the workers be made to don so as to be in OSHA compliance. In a couple of specific instances, it was specifically stated by the General Manager that no such accommodations will be considered since the "cheapest fix to the problem" was to develop and enforce the mandatory donning of personal protective equipment. OSHA lists engineering and administrative controls as the first possibilities prior to personal protective equipment. In OSHA's 29 CFR Part 1910, Subpart Z, 1910.1000(e) expressly states:

"To achieve compliance . . . administrative or engineering controls must first be determined and implemented whenever feasible. When such controls are not feasible to achieve full compliance, protective equipment or any other protective measures shall be used to keep the exposure of workers to air contaminants within the limits prescribed in this section."

An advantage from participating in the management side of the operation was my access to information and conversations that would never reach the ears of the union workers. I knew full well that no such consideration of engineering and administrative controls would ever be considered in response to the majority of the policies regarding personal protective equipment regardless of feasibility. The onus on the workers was the quickest, cheapest, and easiest

solution to implement, at least in the short term. This allowed the company never having to address the initial costs of developing and installing hoods and containment systems. If a cost comparison would be considered over a period of ten plus years, the personal protective equipment would surmount that capital and maintenance costs of the containment system. The onus was always placed on the workers. The issue here was one of agenda setting, and power and control (Cunningham, 1996, 1998; Newman, 1990, 1994; Schied, 1995). Some would state that the workers should be responsible for the safety and health and most of the time the workers, as well as I, would agree. However, when performing work in a dangerous or difficult environment, impeded or restricted ability and mobility could result in harm just as easily, and much more immediately, as the airborne contaminants. This forced the workers to choose between two evils.

An example of this is the training needed for air-purifying respirators in the BOP Shop. It was determined that the atmosphere in the BOP Shop had very elevated levels of several airborne contaminants. The main problem originated when blowing a heat in the BOP vessel which is a process that used oxygen to generate heat to combine molten iron, raw ores, and scrap metal. The problem was when the oxygen was introduced into the vessel, the plume that was generated completely overwhelmed the very under-powered pollution handling hood. The plume would rise and totally immerse the upper floors of the BOP Shop. The company's solution was to make the fourth floor and higher a "respirator required" area. No one was permitted during an operation turn on the upper floors without a donned personal respirator, those without were subject to discipline. This was for the workers own good since this atmosphere would put their health in jeopardy. However, what the management did not understand was that the respirators are very bulky and cumbersome. The respirator's very design impeded sight and mobility. If, by chance, maintenance needed to perform reparations on equipment on the fourth floor or higher during an operating turn, they were required to don their respirators. This opened them up to potential injury or incident. During the blowing of a heat, the workers were totally immersed in the plume and could barely see (a distance of two to three feet) and in the presence of moving machinery (belts, motors, conveyors, cranes) which was dangerous by itself. Now, add the fact that the workers' vision was hindered, especially peripherally, and this was an accident/fatality waiting to happen. Administratively, the BOP Shop could have not blown a heat during the needed repair but this would impact production. Engineering controls would mean the company would need to increase the handling capacity of the pollution hoods. They did neither. Instead, the company subjected the workers to a dangerous situation.

Either the worker would be subject to restricted and impeded mobility thus being susceptible up to a possible accident and possible injury or break the company's safety rules and be subject to discipline. It surely was a lose-lose situation. Either way, if an incident occurred, I would have felt the guilt of it but I had no way of making anything right. For if I did advocate shunning the PPE and turned my head, I would have been subordinate in my duties and obligation to the company and possibly compromised the workers' long term health. If I demanded the PPE be worn and issued discipline in the times that it was not, I would have carried the guilt if donning the PPE did lead to an incident. There was nothing good to come out of it other than hope the worker did not suffer injury in the discharge of their duties while donning PPE. Having to explain to the workers why they need to follow the rules set by the company was not an easy task in light of the compromised work environment the certain personal protective equipment (such as personal respirators, etc) would subject them. I could not honestly tell the workers that this would be the absolute correct procedure to follow. The atmosphere in such training programs was definitely explosive at times and contentious all the time.

Conclusion

Michael Newman (1994) discussed the issue of "competent forms of control" (p 116) manifested by corporations reclassifying jobs as competencies that are followed by the natural progression to develop curriculum to address the competencies. This seems beneficial to the workers but, in fact, Newman argues that it is a "discourse of mediocrity, conformity, and control." Cunningham (1998) argues that team building "does not address the unequal distribution of society's resources and material goods. Adult educators need to be challenged to deliver transformational education giving workers the "really useful knowledge" allowing them to build a better and more balanced society and not just building wealth for an elite few. Gee, Hull, & Lankshear (1996) argue that workers are educated in a "total immersion" of the corporation and offer that educators need to "renew the basic question" of "what should we teach and learn, and why?" Although they have stated they have no definitive answers, adult educators should realize that workers are also adults who function in the community and may have families and/or dependents. Curriculums need to be developed that also offer literacy and other "really useful knowledge" otherwise a permanent underclass will be developed.

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